



Warrant Officer
Norman Cyril
Jackson VC

HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Sergeant (later Warrant
Officer) Norman Jackson VC
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MEDAL COLLECTION UNLESS
OTHERWISE NOTED

Lancaster Mk.IIIs of
106 Squadron RAF taxi
from their dispersals at
Metheringham ahead
of a raid on Germany
OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH



*“Jackson
jettisoned the
escape hatch and
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the fuselage to the
burning wing”*

Of all the incredible stories associated with the Victoria Cross, it is hard to find any that surpass the extraordinary circumstances that led to Warrant Officer Norman Jackson's decoration 80 years ago.

Jackson was awarded Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious award for gallantry for an act of extraordinary heroism in the skies above Germany after his aircraft had been hit and burst into flames. It is all the more remarkable because Jackson survived to tell the tale and, eventually, to receive his decoration from the King.

Norman Cyril Jackson was born in Ealing, London, on April 8, 1919, and the identity of his real parents is not known. Within days, he had been adopted by the Gunter family, who adopted another boy called Geoffrey Oliver Hartley around the same time. Jackson was a bright and lively boy, attending Archdeacon Cambridge Primary School in Twickenham and, later, Twickenham Grammar School, where he developed an interest in engineering. After completing his education, he became a fitter and turner. However, on October 20, 1939, just weeks after the outbreak of World War Two, he joined the RAFVR and made himself available to serve. Initially, he worked as a fitter in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he was

attached to 95 Squadron, whose pilots flew Sunderland flying boats.

In January 1941, he was given the opportunity to join an air crew by training as a flight engineer on bombers. Bomber crews knew that the life expectancy for such roles was short, which is why Jackson later said of his decision to become an airman: “I don't know why, because I wanted to live!”

In September 1942, Jackson returned to England and spent six months at 27 Operational Training Unit. In July 1943, and by then a sergeant, he joined 106 Squadron at Syerston, near Newark, Nottinghamshire, and completed around a dozen operational sorties before the squadron moved to Metheringham, Lincolnshire, in November.

Winging it

By April 24, 1944, Jackson had completed his scheduled tour of 30 operations, mostly over heavily defended German targets. However, before taking some time off, he volunteered for one more sortie “for luck” on the night of April 26/27. Earlier that day, he had been told that his wife had just given birth to their son and the crew decided to celebrate the happy arrival on their return from that night's mission. However, things did not go according to plan.

The target for the Lancaster crew was Schweinfurt in northwest Bavaria, some 50 miles northwest of Nuremberg and the centre of the German ball-bearing industry. In the dead of night, the bombs from Jackson's Lancaster were dropped and the aircraft was climbing out of the target area when it was suddenly attacked by a night-fighter at nearly 20,000ft.

The captain and pilot took evasive action, but the enemy Focke-Wulf Fw 190 secured several hits and a fire started near a petrol tank on the upper surface of the bomber's starboard wing. Jackson had been thrown to the floor during the engagement and was received shell splinters in his right leg and shoulder.

Recovering his composure, he told his fellow crew that he could deal with the fire on the wing and obtained his captain's permission to try to put out the flames. Pushing a small fire extinguisher into the top of his lifejacket and clipping on his parachute pack, Jackson jettisoned the escape hatch above the pilot's head. He then started to climb out of the cockpit and crawl along the top of the fuselage to the burning wing.

Before he could exit fully, and with the Lancaster travelling at around 200mph, his parachute pack opened and the canopy and rigging lines spilled into the cockpit. Undeterred, Jackson continued

the task he had set himself. The pilot, bomb-aimer and navigator gathered the parachute together and held on to the rigging lines, playing them out as the Jackson crawled into the unknown.

However, as he edged his way towards the fire, Jackson slipped and fell onto the starboard wing, grasping the leading edge of the wing. He succeeded in clinging on, but dropped the fire extinguisher, which blew away. By this time, the fire had spread and fierce flames were licking towards the ailing airman. Soon his face, hands and clothing were severely burned and, to add to his woes, the enemy fighter came back and strafed the Lancaster for a second time. Unable to retain his grip any longer, Jackson was swept through the flames and over the trailing edge of the bomber's wing, dragging his parachute behind.

Realising the aircraft could not be controlled, the captain gave the order to abandon the stricken bomber. Four of the remaining members of the crew parachuted to safety. However, the captain and rear gunner were never accounted for and appear to have died when the aircraft crashed.

Long recovery

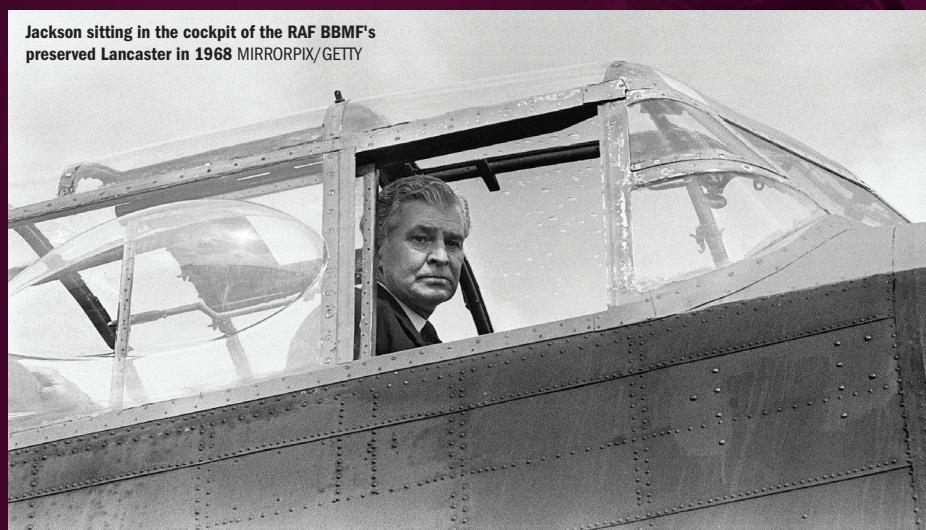
When last seen by one of his six fellow crew, Jackson's parachute was only partly inflated and burning in a number of places. Unknown to them, he had cleared the aircraft and, though wounded and with his parachute ablaze, had come to ground, although he had been unable to control his descent and landed heavily. He suffered a broken ankle, his right eye was closed through burns and his hands were burnt so badly as to render them useless. Only a third of his parachute was intact.

Jackson had landed in enemy territory and realised he was too badly hurt to try to hide or evade. At daybreak, he crawled to the nearest village, where the male occupant of the first cottage he came to spat at him and verbally abused him. However, the man's two daughters were more sympathetic to Jackson's plight and dressed his wounds.

Once the German authorities were alerted to his presence, Jackson was captured and transported to Dulag Luft, a prison camp that acted as a collection and interrogation centre for newly captured Allied aircrew. Due to his severe injuries, Jackson spent his first ten months in hospital before being imprisoned with other POWs. During his captivity, he made two escape attempts. The second, close to the end of the war in Europe, was successful and he



Jackson's fellow crewmen pictured in the *Sunday Express* in 1961



"I was the most experienced member of the crew, and they all looked to me to do something"

WARRANT OFFICER NORMAN JACKSON VC

met up with troops from General Patton's US Third Army near Munich.

After the war, he was reunited with his wife Alma, whom he had married in London on Boxing Day 1942. They eventually had seven children, four sons and three daughters.

Scarred man

As the full story of Jackson's courage emerged, he was recommended for the VC. His decoration was announced in *The London Gazette* on October 26, 1945. The final words of his lengthy citation read: "By his ready willingness to face these dangers he set an example of self-sacrifice which will ever be remembered."

Jackson returned to Britain on VE Day and later received his VC at Buckingham Palace from George VI on November 13, 1945. Furthermore, Jackson's adopted

brother, Geoffrey Hartley, was awarded the George Medal for bravery in 1951 while serving as a lieutenant with the police in Malaya. In a reference to the decorations for both her adopted sons, Mrs Gunter said: "We adopted two of the finest sons any parents could wish for."

Jackson, who retired in the rank of warrant officer with a disability pension, was always modest about his wartime role, once saying of his VC action: "I was the most experienced member of the crew, and they all looked to me to do something."

He carried his wartime injuries with him for the rest of his life, with his hands being particularly badly scarred. He worked as a travelling salesman for Haig whisky after the war. Perhaps because of being adopted himself, he was a passionate family man and, despite his injuries, built a house for his family with the help of a friend.

During his life, Jackson was periodically haunted by nightmares of his brush with death. Today, I suspect it would be described as a mental health illness and it would not be surprising if it was what we now know as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

Nevertheless, he enjoyed a happy retirement. He died at Hampton Hill, Middlesex, on March 26, 1994, aged 74. His name is listed on the RAF Memorial at St Clement Danes Church, London.

Delayed tribute

It was because of brave men like Norman Jackson that, more than a decade ago, I pledged £1m towards a £6.7m fund to build a permanent Bomber Command Memorial in London's Green Park.

RAF Bomber Command consisted of some 125,000 volunteers from Britain, the Commonwealth and Allied countries who endured some of the most terrifying combat conditions as they took the war to Germany. The average age of the aircrew was just 22. Three out of every five became casualties and the more detailed statistics tell their own story: 55,573 men killed, 8,403 wounded and 9,838 captured. Bomber Command losses were greater than those of any other service – accounting for 10% of all British fatalities. Yet, perversely, its members were the only World War Two servicemen not to have been publicly honoured by their country until the Bomber Command Memorial was unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II on June 28, 2012.

A few years ago, I visited Twickenham



Jackson's medal group, comprising his VC, 1939-45 Star, Air Crew Europe Star, Italy Star, Defence Medal, War Medal, Elizabeth II Coronation Medal and Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal

Cemetery in southwest London to pay my respects to Jackson at his graveside. In a quiet corner of the cemetery, there is a black marble tombstone inscribed: "Cherished memories of a dearly loved husband, father and grandfather."

While I was there, I saw that the plot was also the final resting place of not just Jackson's wife but also their son Brian, who, as related earlier, was born on the day that Jackson embarked on his last bombing mission and had died aged 72. At the cemetery, I met one of Norman Jackson's surviving children, David, a semi-retired businessman. He spoke affectionately of his father, telling me:

"Dad was a wonderful man with a great sense of humour. He was humble and rarely discussed his VC action, but there is no doubt that the bravery he showed was simply incredible."

I am the proud custodian of the Jackson medal group, having purchased it at auction 20 years ago. As a medal collector, I am sometimes asked which is my 'favourite' VC. It's a question I decline to answer because it is as unfair as asking a parent to choose their 'favourite' child, when each of their offspring is equally loved. However, I am prepared to say that I know of no single VC action that I admire more than Jackson's. **BW**



Jackson at home with his wife and children

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes*, was first published in 2006. For more information, visit victoriacrossheroes.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War

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